

after its massive building programme was cancelled (depriving Grimsby Institute of its big rebuilding and, in the end, financing only the few colleges whose principals had the good sense to pull them down, like Barnsley). It makes fascinating reading.

The second half of the book is less satisfactory, being an attempt to answer the unanswerable question – why do the cockups happen? The answer must be for a thousand reasons, particularly the scale and complexity of government business.

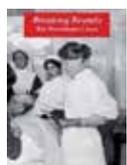
Most difficult is the field of IT purchase. Grandiose hopes on the part of ministers are all too often compounded by impossible expectations sold by the computer firms. Both are then complicated by being changed and confused in the process so consultants have to be brought in, at extra expense, to clear up the mess.

The second problem area is the structure of the civil service and the roles of ministers and civil servants. These are not clear cut and are subject to constant changes, so there needs to be more effective and continuous project supervision. The civil servants haven't got the skills or experience of management. Those at the top are better at protecting and servicing ministers than managing delivery and change.

All these usual reasons are examined and discussed. A third area, however, is more worrying. Just as there is no economically rational man, there is no administratively rational public service, so the sooner we realise this and control its consequences the better. There are no simple answers, but Bacon's long experience in probing the disasters suggests approaches, not for curing the problems – we'll never do that – but for handling them better. Which is, I suppose, the best we can hope. I like my bacon well done. This is. 🍷

**Austin Mitchell** is Labour MP for Great Grimsby and an Associate Editor of *The House*

Newnhamite writers' profiles of six of their pioneering forebears draw praise from **Lord Lexden**



### **Breaking Bounds: Six Newnham Lives**

Edited by **Biddy Passmore**  
Newnham College  
£10 (+ £5 p&p at [www.newn.cam.ac.uk](http://www.newn.cam.ac.uk))

**T**he Newnham in the title is, of course, the thriving women's college in Cambridge which developed out of a boarding house that opened in 1871 with just a handful of ardent female students. Biddy Passmore, devoted Newnhamite and highly regarded education journalist, hit on the brilliant idea of getting six Newnham graduates who have become distinguished and successful writers – Jenn Ashworth, Margaret Drabble, Elaine Feinstein, Sarah LeFanu, Sue Limb and Claire Tomalin (what a lineup!) – to produce short, incisive profiles of six remarkable women who studied at the college during its early years. This hugely enjoyable book is the result.

Each of the six beautifully written miniature biographies recalls a strong and attractive personality who left a firm mark upon her times. As well as feminist writers (one of whom had a child with the married HG Wells at the age of 21), they include a recently qualified surgeon who rushed to join the small Women's Hospital Corps on the outbreak of the First World War, the first English translator of some of the greatest Russian literature and a multi-talented, pioneering conservationist who saved much of the Cornish coastline from the greedy hands of the developers in the 1930s.

Though in many ways a diverse group of delightfully idiosyncratic talents, they had a number of common characteristics. They were all very able. Astonishingly, degrees only became available to Cambridge women as late as 1948, but outstanding results were



achieved by these Newnhamite prodigies who sat exams. Peggy Pollard, saviour of the Cornish coast, was the first woman to get a first in oriental languages. Like the others, she wore her learning with charm and grace.

None of them sought a prominent position at the forefront of political campaigns, though all gave firm support to the progressive causes of the day; not the slightest trace of Tory or rightwing sentiment was to be found among them. Amber Reeves, the Newnhamite who had a youthful fling with Wells, was persuaded in 1931 to fight a hopeless seat for Labour, losing by 51,000 votes.

They all made their mark by pursuing their career goals with a firm sense of



purpose and commitment. Marjorie Blandy, the young doctor who went to the western front, added steadily to her qualifications after her return to London, becoming the first female medical registrar at her hospital in 1920. Constance Garnett, whose

**“ Though in many ways a diverse group of delightfully idiosyncratic talents, they had a number of common characteristics ”**

acclaimed translations of great Russian authors filled over 70 volumes, “changed the literary climate of England”, as Claire

Tomalin puts it in her contribution to this compelling slim volume. The saddest member of the little group, Amy Levy, had published several collections of poetry and three novels by the time she took her own life at the age of 27. Newnham taught them above all how to combine talent with the discipline that brings success.

The tyranny of Victorian middle-class mores was eagerly discarded. Sue Limb notes that Peggy Pollard “dabbled once or twice in Sapphic love (strictly from the waist up)” at Newnham. Fuller enjoyment probably followed in Cornwall after her marriage, when she fell for a female violinist. Such diversions took place on the periphery of life. It was chiefly through their

remarkable professional accomplishments that these six Newnhamites broke the bounds within which society as a whole – including many leftwing men – had sought to confine them. Their greatest common characteristic is that they were all pioneers, pointing the way for women who came after them. This little gem of a book shows how they did it. 📖

**Alistair Lexden**, a Conservative peer, is the author of a book on women in the Conservative party and contributed to episode two of a recent BBC TV programme on their key role in the Primrose League, *Suffragettes Forever! The Story of Women and Power* (available on iPlayer until 3 April)